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Abstract

Any term like 'pioneering science fiction' might be highly suspect since the very origins of this genre are fiercely disputed. Most of the readers and critics of science fiction would emphasise its recent conception and development, pointing out that such a mode of thought and fiction could only come into vogue in the post- Enlightenment era when scientific discourses have visibly as well as distinctly started shaping human knowledge. Others would argue that, in essence, its roots could be traced back to the beginnings of human creativity and literature. While some go back to unearth the science-fictional 'fantastic' quality in the Syrian Epic of Gilgamesh (c. 2000 BC), others see the 'utopian' promise in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1526); yet others appreciate the strange 'otherness' portrayed in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). Most see H.G. Wells (1866–1946) and/or Jules Verne (1828–1905) as the Father(s) of Science Fiction. Adam Roberts, however, considers John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) as first having science-fictional qualities, albeit in a theological garb.

SUSMITA ROYE

‘Sultana’s Dream’ vs. Rokeya’s Reality: A Study of one of the ‘Pioneering’ Feminist Science Fictions

LOCATING ROKEYA’S FICTION IN LITERARY HISTORY

Any term like ‘pioneering science fiction’ might be highly suspect since the very origins of this genre are fiercely disputed. Most of the readers and critics of science fiction would emphasise its recent conception and development, pointing out that such a mode of thought and fiction could only come into vogue in the post-Enlightenment era when scientific discourses have visibly as well as distinctly started shaping human knowledge. Others would argue that, in essence, its roots could be traced back to the beginnings of human creativity and literature. While some go back to unearth the science-fictional ‘fantastic’ quality in the Syrian *Epic of Gilgamesh* (c. 2000 BC), others see the ‘utopian’ promise in Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1526); yet others appreciate the strange ‘otherness’ portrayed in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726). Most see H.G. Wells (1866–1946) and/or Jules Verne (1828–1905) as the Father(s) of Science Fiction. Adam Roberts, however, considers John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) as first having science-fictional qualities, albeit in a theological garb. On the other hand, as Robert Scholes and Eric Rabkin point out, ‘most literary historians agree that the first work of fiction that has all of the characteristics of the science fiction genre was written by a woman’ (6) and that was none other than Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley (1797–1851). The work of fiction referred to is, of course, her *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818). It is widely agreed that her development of the prevalent Gothic imagination gradually engendered a new species of fiction that no longer depended upon the supernatural but started heavily drawing from science to simultaneously stimulate one’s wildest imagination and arouse in one a chilling terror. This new species of fiction eventually came to be known as science fiction, its dependence upon science generically distinguishing it from earlier Gothic fiction. Taking Mary Shelley’s pioneer status for granted, Scholes and Rabkin wittily name the nineteenth century as the ‘First Century A.F. (After Frankenstein)’ where they name Jules Verne, Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), Edward Bellamy (1850–1898) and Edgar Rice Burroughs (1875–1950) as the main figures that gave a shape to this fledgling genre. It can be seen, then, that different critics have given the crown of the pioneer of this genre to different persons and the argument presumably is an endless one.

But if, as the majority of critics agree, science fiction is indeed a young genre, then feminist science fiction is even younger. Although Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is often viewed as the first proper science-fiction novel, and her powerfully evocative fiction delineates the admirable-but-accursed inventing power of a (male) scientist, it does not necessarily challenge prescribed gender roles, or imagine a feminist utopia. Of course, many critics from Ellen Moers and Fred Randel to Bette London and Nancy Yousef detect feminism in Shelley's work, but it may safely be said that it certainly does not present a feminist sci-fi utopia. In the wake of the success of her enormously influential novel, it was mainly men who followed the path she charted and it was more than a century later that women start trying their hand at it. In fact, Adam Roberts and Sarah Lefanu roughly mark the 1960s as the starting point of writing science fiction. Roberts associates Marion Zimmer Bradley (1930–1999), Andre Norton (1912–2005) and Ursula Le Guin (1929–) with popularising this new offshoot of the genre (93). Lefanu, however, sees Joanna Russ (1937–) and Susan Wood (1918–) as the 'pioneering' figures (14). In mentioning other women writers who explored these areas even before the 1960s, Lefanu refers to Pamela Sargent's collection of science fiction stories by women, *Women of Wonder: SF Stories by Women about Women* (published in 1974). The earliest work in this anthology is Judith Merrill's 'That Only a Mother' which was written in 1948, although it is not strictly or self-declaredly a work of science fiction. So, taking into account the information provided by critics, it would appear that feminist science fiction becomes a dominant and recognisable trend only from the 1960s onwards, and even if some previous 'science' stories by women may have feminist overtones, those appear to emerge no earlier than the 1940s. However, this essay focuses on a story which is both feminist and science-fictional and which is written long before this kind of writing becomes acceptable or fashionable. This is Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's 'Sultana's Dream', written and published in 1905. Keeping in mind the literary history of this genre as traced so far, it can be justifiably claimed that Rokeya's work is one of the 'pioneering' feminist science fictions.

In any case, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's (1880–1932) reputation is well established as the first female writer of science fiction on the Indian subcontinent. This is her only story in the colonial master's language but although it was originally written and published in English, Rokeya later translated it into Bengali to facilitate an easier accessibility by the vernacular-reading women of Bengal who formed her target readership. Nevertheless, by writing this single story in English, she becomes one of the earliest Indian woman writers to express herself in this alien tongue. Indian women's writing in English gradually started flowering as late as the 1870s with Toru Dutt's (1856–1877) literary works. Then followed writers like Krupabai Satthianadhan (1862–1894), Shevantibai Nikambe (n.d.) and Cornelia Sorabji (1866–1954), all of whom drew attention to Indian woman's woes. Works like Satthianadhan's *Kamala* (1895) or *Saguna* (1894), Nikambe's

Ratanbai (1895) and Sorabji's *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* (1901) strive to show the many social evils and constrictions including: child marriage, disapproval of widow-remarriage, and prejudice against female education, that circumscribe a woman's life. These works offer snapshots from the lives of different communities of Hindus, Parsees and native Christians. However, up to this point, the Muslim woman is certainly not abundantly represented in English by any Muslim woman writer. Rokeya is one of the first Muslim women to attempt this task. She is distinct not merely in taking the reader into the world of a purdahnashin Muslim woman,¹ but also in her manner of dealing with it. Whereas the other writers of her time endorse the realist style of writing to describe their society, Rokeya chooses the science-fictional fantastic mode to envisage what her society could become; while the others limit themselves to the remembered past and the lived present in the portrayal of their characters' nightmarish existence, Rokeya boldly forays into the unknown future through her protagonist's dream; while the others angrily demolish the unjust structures of the world they live in, Rokeya constructs a utopia of justice and virtue. A groundbreaking work of such novelty, power and promise surely deserves a thorough in-depth analysis, which this essay hopes to accomplish.

A FEMINIST UTOPIA

'Sultana's Dream' was first published in the *Indian Ladies' Magazine*, at Madras. It narrates the dream of a purdahnashin woman, Sultana. The eponymous protagonist happens to doze off one evening but seems to be woken up by a visitor, whom she initially mistakes for her dear friend, Sister Sara. The visitor asks Sultana to accompany her on a walk outdoors, and deeming a brief walk in the garden with a lady not so inappropriate in the darkness of the night, which will easily shroud her from men's eyes, Sultana ventures forth. However, to her utter astonishment, it is broad daylight outside and she becomes painfully shy. Soon her anxieties are put to rest when she realises that not a single man is to be seen anywhere, and instead, women are walking, talking, working all around her. Then she is informed by her companion that this place is called Ladyland, where Virtue herself rules. Yet, the land has not always enjoyed such bliss. In the olden days, when the male Prime Minister mainly ruled on behalf of their 'minor' Queen, strict purdah for women was observed. Women of this dreamland then, as in Sultana's real world, were kept confined in zenanas while their men dominated and ruled. Later, when the 'adult' Queen issued orders for female education, schools and universities for women were set up which radically widened the horizons for these women. Once a neighbouring king declared war on their land for not bowing to his command to hand over a few of his citizens who had sought political asylum in Ladyland, and taking this as an opportunity to demonstrate their muscle-power, the men of Ladyland marched to the battlefield to combat the king's army, only to return wounded and nearly defeated. At this crucial point, the Queen appealed to her lady scholars to use their brain-power to defeat the enemy, upon which the Lady Principal of a women's university came up with her ingenious scientific idea of

using trapped concentrated solar heat to burn the foe's armaments and force them to flee. Meanwhile, the surviving male members of their society were ordered by the Queen to enter the zenanas² so that the purdahnashin women could come out of their homes to tackle the alien forces. Wounded, tired and convinced that their land could no longer be saved, these men accepted the offer of temporary respite in the zenanas while their women implemented their plans. After the enemy was driven out, the men were never allowed to leave the zenanas despite their endless appeals to their monarch. This is how the women came to rule the land. Since, as is claimed in this story, there is no vice or corruption left under their efficient administration, and Sultana, at a loss for words to sufficiently praise this novel society, simply remarks, 'I see Purity itself reigns over your land' (171). Clearly, a strong feminism colours both the activities of women leaders of this fictional land as well as the grand vision of the writer herself.

This feminist vision creates a utopia. Ladyland is ruled by 'Virtue' and 'Purity', embodied by the far-sighted wise Queen. There is no want or sin or suffering here. Since men, who are, according to the story, corrupt and evil by nature, are safely confined, there arises no need for a Police Officer or Magistrate or Military force in this land. If someone does err s/he is punished by being banished from the land forever because the authorities do not believe in taking away a life that God has gifted. At the same time, mercy is shown to sincere penitents. Thus, justice seems to be delivered in the best possible manner. Similarly, agriculture and commerce are well employed by these women who plan to replace the innumerable ugly brick buildings with a large beautiful horticultural garden. Their religion is based on Truth and Love, which prevents all kinds of communal fanaticism. There are no epidemics and premature deaths. There is no time for petty jealousies and quarrels among these women because they are always busy with more fruitful occupations. In the absence of railroads or paved paths, there arises no possibility of unfortunate life-taking accidents. The time taken for travel is considerably reduced by the aerial conveyances that take them from one place to another in surprisingly short time. When Sister Sara takes Sultana to the Queen, she mentions that even before she could realize that their strange 'air-car' has started moving, they had reached the palace. That there is no false pomp or pride about the Queen and that Sultana from an ordinary household is received 'cordially without any ceremony' (171) by Her Majesty point to the admirable egalitarianism of the land. The author, in fact, sketches her utopia in the minutest detail: not only is there no crime or want or crushing class system here but also the fortunate denizens are free from mud, dirt and even mosquitoes. In every way, Ladyland is the perfect h(e)aven for women.

The existence of this utopia relies not so much on women's physical prowess as on their ingenious scientific and technological innovations. Ladyland has become what it is because its women are great scientists. When women face the challenge of defeating a powerful enemy, they simply resort to science instead of

trying to fight the aggressor with their 'arms' (connoting both bodily strength and armament). So, in the battlefield, the Lady Principal with her two thousand female students, strikes terror into the foes' hearts by showering on them a scorching heat that is generated by directing all the concentrated sunlight towards them. During the subsequent era of peace, they till their lands with electricity and take care of their crops with the help of their advanced botanical science. Presumably, their thorough acquaintance with medical science prevents diseases and premature deaths. Women scientists have even sent up a special 'water-balloon' to the space above the clouds to directly collect water from the atmosphere and that water is regulated and distributed through huge pipes attached to it. This arrangement not only enables them to draw as much rainwater as they want in a convenient way but also prevents thunderstorms and rainfall that might result in floods. Additionally, water for taking a shower is available by opening the removable roof of the bathroom and turning on the tap of the pipe. The kitchens do not have dirty chimneys because there is no coal fire to emit smoke. Instead the people use solar heat to do their cooking in a neat and healthy manner. Moreover, they use electricity for their aerial conveyances. Using science, these women have revolutionised their style of living. In this dream-world science becomes the tool of the so-called weaker sex to wield authority.

SULTANA'S DREAM VS. ROKEYA'S REALITY

This feminist utopia is, after all, only a dream and, drawing from its Greek roots, as Barnita Bagchi reminds us, '[Utopia] is, most of all, about embodying a dream, a dream of an ideal place ("eu-topia") which is, at the same time, no place ('ou-topia'), for it does not exist until imagined into existence by those strongly inspired by the dream of an ideal life' (xviii). More importantly, Sultana's dream concerns a *purdahnashin*, which is a measure of the radicalism of this story as it throws into sharp relief Rokeya's reality. In the world Sultana dreams of, women are happily liberated and know no hindrance; not a single woman wears a veil. This is clearly light-years away from what Rokeya (and Sultana) lives through. Rokeya ranks among the early Muslim feminists in South Asia. Even as late as the turn of the twentieth century, she found her ideas and ideologies of balancing gender inequalities and demanding the female's right to basic needs for a healthy living pitted against the almost impregnable durability of a patriarchal system that had solidified over centuries in the name of tradition. Women — especially Muslim women — in British India were still behind the *purdah*, deprived of a proper education and slaves to men's whims. Rokeya scathingly wrote and relentlessly campaigned against the custom of *purdah*. Yet, the irony is that she herself had to strictly abide by most of the social customs she was fighting against. Despite condemning *purdah* in her polemics, she had to wear a *burqa* when she went out into public. Bagchi explains this contradiction:

[h]er reputation for departing from the norm made it all the more difficult for Rokeya to be accepted as a competent educator by parents who had to garner sufficient faith in

her ability as a teacher and in her moral values to entrust her with the responsibility of educating their daughters. (ix–x)

Even if she did not like it, she had to continue observing purdah to retain people's faith in her integrity and allegiance to her own culture because without the support of her few sympathisers, her radical reformist activities stood little chance of succeeding.

Sultana dreams that the men of Ladyland are confined at home to do all household work. In this land, it is the men who do the cooking, washing, cleaning and take care of children. Although, they are such inept creatures that they are not entrusted with delicate tasks like embroidery and knitting. Women instead do that because they are able to handle both the work in the offices/laboratories as well as skilled domestic duties. In Rokeya's world, women did sewing and knitting as part of their confined lives, and that in no way reflected on their versatile efficiency. Whereas men in Ladyland are thrust into enclosed spaces wittily called 'murdanas' (masculine version for the word zenana), women in Rokeya's reality were confined in 'zenanas'. She witnessed the suppression of women's individuality and spirits through a suffocating internment. The idea of purdah (veil) arises from a conception of feminine modesty but this is stretched too far by the jealousy of domineering males when it is gradually given the shape of total incarceration. Sonia Nishat Amin points out how many Muslim *bhadramahilas* ('gentle-women') of modern Bengal around this time had begun distinguishing between *purdah* and *abarodh*. *Purdah* is seen as 'modesty in dress and behaviour' whereas *abarodh* is a 'patriarchal distortion of purdah which makes women invisible behind the *andarmahal* [inner quarters for women]' (Amin 139). Rokeya herself denounced the injustices heaped on a confined woman in *Abarodhbasini* (woman living in *abarodh*) — a series of essays that was written in Bengali and published in 1931. In 'Sultana's Dream', her subversion of the idea of protecting women's modesty by instead putting men into confinement is a powerfully acerbic critique of the system of *abarodh*.

The reason given for keeping men in *abarodh* in Ladyland is that 'Men ... are rather of lower morals' (172). Sister Sara explains to Sultana that just as lunatics and wild beasts should not be let loose, men with their beastly nature should also not be allowed total freedom. She is horrified to see that 'Men, who do or at least are capable of doing no end of mischief, are let loose and the innocent women shut up in the zenana [in Sultana's world]!' (165). She considers it unfair and unnatural. When Sultana reminds her that men are, after all, physically stronger than women, Sister Sara dismisses such explanation because, as she highlights, lions are stronger than human beings and yet can be captured by them; similarly, elephants have larger brains than human beings but are still no match for them. Sister Sarah claims that, although admittedly physically weaker than men, women are superior to them in intellect and morals. However, Rokeya lived in a social reality where women were both physically weaker and intellectually less developed than men. They were denied education and were thereby deliberately

kept intellectually stunted. As for morals, that too often was nearly unachievable since, born and bred in the filth of male lasciviousness and unjust domination in the (physically and morally) unhealthy zenanas, women, more often than not, were unable to develop into exemplary creatures in any respect. Worse is that even when some women were genuinely virtuous, such virtue went virtually unnoticed and inadequately appreciated because virtue was considered to be a 'duty' of a woman, which if she failed to perform, was severely reprimanded and/or punished. On the other hand, men were unencumbered by such moral restrictions, exposing the misbalanced gender-morality prevalent in the society.

Sultana's dream-world is one where women run universities and are great scientists. They are one and all highly educated and are also in control of the educational system of their community. Sister Sara mentions that she works in the laboratory and describes to Sultana the various scientific wonders achieved by their women. That is indeed only possible in a dream for both Sultana and Rokeya. Rokeya lived in a world where she was allowed only a narrow traditional religious education at home, suited to limit the mental horizons of aspiring girls and to equip them solely for a confined life as a wife and mother. In fact, it served to entrench in them a complacency with their confinement and so they never recognised the lamentable lowliness of their condition. However, Rokeya was secretly taught Bengali and English by her eldest brother, who was in favour of female education. Her first biographer, Shamsunnahar Mahmud, describes how they had to wait for the dead of the night to be able to conduct their clandestine studies since the family objected to such untraditional learning for girls. Later, her husband actively fostered her education and encouraged her to write. Consequently, in spite of never having been to a school to learn, Rokeya grew into an exceptionally knowledgeable woman. Her struggle to achieve this feat indicates the strength of prejudice against female education in her culture. When Rokeya later decided to open a school for girls with the money left to her by her dead husband, she faced immense opposition from her own in-laws. In fact, they defeated her plan to establish a school in Bhagalpur — the town where her in-laws lived — and drove her away to Calcutta, where the strong-willed young reformer opened her school. She had to overcome innumerable obstacles to educate the few girls who came to her school, which struggled for survival against the pressure of strong social disapproval. Under such dishearteningly difficult conditions for female students, women scientists are creatures of a dreamland indeed. It is true that by the beginning of the twentieth century, science had in general started dominating educational curriculums since, as Geraldine Forbes points out, it was a world where "science" was equivalent to "modern" (71). However, women's education was not expected to be 'modern' and thus, science was not seen as important for them as it was not deemed to be needed to prepare them for their domestic lives. In most girls' schools, the students were taught basic arithmetic, home 'science', language and knitting and weaving skills. Other radical women

who violated the limitations prescribed for traditional female learning and aspired to study medical sciences still confronted considerable opposition. Despite the task of healing being traditionally seen as suited to women, it was seen to be objectionable if it involved any scientific training.

Perhaps the most fascinating discrepancy between Sultana's dreamland and Rokeya's real world are the scientific innovations that are spoken of. Atomic bombs that generate tremendous heat are yet to be invented (in 1945) but the women of Ladyland already use a different method to direct concentrated heat on their enemies. The first artificial satellite to be sent into space (in 1957) is still decades away and yet, women scientists of this dreamland have sent a 'water-balloon' into the atmosphere to trap rainwater for them. Not very long ago (in 1903), the Wright brothers had succeeded in remaining air-borne for a considerable length of time to prove that the dream of human flight could materialise with further scientific and technological efforts; in Ladyland, however, the technique has already been perfected in the form of 'air-cars' so much so that the inhabitants no longer need road and railways. Mr. McPherson, a friend of Rokeya's husband, makes the following comment after reading the story: 'I wonder if she has foretold here the manner in which we may be able to move about in the air at some future time' (qtd in Jahan 2). Indeed imagination can reach certain heights before scientific inventions can match it but this creative fantasy of science fiction writers to anticipate some of the greatest inventions of mankind is astounding. Jules Verne and H.G. Wells had already sent humans to the moon in their novels. The time machine had been invented in fiction by Wells a decade earlier and Verne has also sent man to the core of the earth. Land, water, air, space — all have been invaded by human (scientific) imagination by 1905. Science fiction has already started establishing itself as a separate genre by the turn of the twentieth century and at such a crucial juncture of its development comes Rokeya's story. It is hard to believe that despite her restricted education at home and the limited knowledge she gathered from her brother and husband, Rokeya was well acquainted with all the new developments in science and literature (especially the science fiction) of her times. At the same time, it is equally difficult to imagine how, without any hint or notion drawn from others' works, her fantasy soared so high with regard to scientific achievements described in her fiction to render its originality and distinct flavour.

With contemporaneous science still struggling to achieve many of its wonders like trapping renewable sources of energy or fulfilling humanity's desire to soar among clouds, Rokeya's imagination is remarkable. Of course, one could argue that the flight of imagination cannot be limited, but the interesting point to note is that the author strives to provide convincing scientific explanations for the working of her innovations. Quite in a Vernian style, she attempts to base her fictional inventions on the scientific coordinates known then, thereby fitting them within the prevalent scientific discourses of her time. Solar heat, for example, is

shown to be distributed through pipes attached to kitchens, although how that heat is trapped is silently glossed over. The mechanism of the 'air-car' is also explained: a square plank with seats screwed to it can rise in air due to the wings and hydrogen balls attached to it. The hydrogen balls are said to help this solid object overcome the force of gravity, thereby preparing it for a take-off, while the wings, which whirl when electricity is applied to them, lift the car into air. Crude and insufficient as this scientific explanation may seem, it should be remembered that this comes from a woman who has never had a formal 'scientific' education and has never been to a school as a student. In light of her background, her triumph in the form of this science-fictional story becomes significant and praiseworthy.

SIGNIFICANCE OF ROKEYA'S STORY

As mentioned, Rokeya did not have a formal education but she later goes on to become the pioneer of female education in Bengal. Forbes notes that that Rokeya was not the first Muslim woman to set up a school for Muslim girls³ but 'her systematic and undaunted devotion to this project has earned her the title of pioneer' (55). So, coming from a legendary educator, this story, which shows what women can achieve with learning and liberation, is telling. It is both a form of propaganda and a protest. Moreover, one must not forget that Rokeya is a triply marginalised author: she is a woman, a Muslim woman and a colonised Muslim woman. As a woman, she belongs to the 'second sex' with only secondary rights and privileges. When she additionally happens to be a *sharif* (high-caste) Muslim woman, she is further restrained and stripped of her agency in order to safeguard the status of the family and the honour of their culture and religion. Of course, being a colonised woman loudly declares the subject's (near-)inaudibility. Fighting all these barriers, she has shown extraordinary courage in voicing her opinion and proclaiming her vision.

Although not yet widely acknowledged, Rokeya's story can be seen as the first feminist science fiction, if the history of this genre is taken into consideration. In her world, where she could become educated only with the help of a few progressive male relatives (her brother and husband), to even imagine a male-guidance/male-domination-free women's realm is radical to the extreme. It seems surprising that one of the earliest feminist science fiction should come from the pen of an Indian woman from a colonised corner of the earth, where voices like hers are easily crushed by centuries of native patriarchal traditions and additionally by the male predominance of the imperialist machine. Yet, it is perhaps understandably predictable (though such a view might seem far-fetched at first). Direst needs make one take the most radical steps. The suffocating existence of a colonised Muslim woman coerces her to invent an equally explosive way to be delivered from the constraints of purdah, *abarodh*, lack of education, absence of agency. In comparison, one might say, the white women who later go on to establish the feminist branch of science fiction, still have space to breathe and can afford gradually to find a means to explore and explode ideas of gendered

roles in patriarchy. Whereas Rokeya is victimised by two layers of patriarchy — indigenous and imperialist — the white woman comes under the domination of one, and that too the one which professes to be superior to indigenous patriarchies in its benevolent treatment of its women, so much so that it claims the right to civilise the ‘others’. No wonder then that an *abarodhbasini* like Rokeya⁴ should be one of the pioneers to imagine a feminist utopia.

A science-fictional utopia is fantastic and ‘the mark of the fantastic’, Scholes and Rabkin explain, ‘is the thrill of seeing the *believed* unreal become real’ (169–70). To imagine a land of learned and liberated women is a good way of defying the despair of deprived and incarcerated women. Looking forward to such a ‘fantastic’ future in imagination is a strong incentive in the present to pave the path to it. What Rokeya is portraying is both fantastic and futuristic: this dream of a world will motivate the quest for the world of dreams. This realm will witness the sanction of female liberty. Yet, Rokeya’s feminist utopia is largely informed by the social discourses of her time. It is neither perfect nor totally radical after all. This is a land where women rule, enjoy freedom, benefit from education and are not forced into child-marriage. Nevertheless, this vision is not wholly liberated from certain cultural prejudices of its society. Seclusion is still strictly practised. Men must remain confined in *murdanas* so that women can function outdoors. In fact, they go into seclusion in the first place to allow women to step out of home (without the fear of being ogled by strange men) to defend their country. Before that, Sister Sara proudly asserts, women’s universities carefully maintained seclusion. Even now, when women are permitted to roam about the streets, they can only meet men of ‘sacred relations’ (171), but in utopian broadmindedness, even distant relatives are considered as sacred as a brother. Nonetheless, the fact remains that a line is drawn between the sexes. Furthermore, although Roushan Jahan points out that ‘to portray a society where women are in a position of power, Rokeya did not find it necessary to eliminate men or to propose anything so drastic as Charlotte Perkins Gilman did a few years later in *Herland*, in which parthenogenesis was the means for continuing a unisex society’ (4). Rokeya’s utopia is, after all, highly sexist and depends upon the deprivation and exploitation of a section of society. Now, men are confined and are thereby denied privileges of equality and freedom. Like the women of the *zenanas* in Rokeya’s world, the men of the *murdanas* in *Ladyland* have stopped grumbling over their lot, realizing the futility of doing so. They are also the butt of unkind jokes from women. Sultana mocks at their condition by saying that she should not stay too long in Sister Sara’s kitchen because the men of her household must be cursing her for not being able to come to the kitchen in the presence of an unknown woman, and they both heartily laugh at this joke. Initially, when Sultana feels shy to have come out in the open, the women of *Ladyland* laugh at her, saying she was ‘mannish’ in her coyness and unwillingness to come outdoors. Not surprisingly, Rokeya’s husband, on reading the story, remarks that it is a ‘terrible revenge!’ (Jahan 2). However, Bharati Ray

comments, 'It was not revenge; it was rebellion ... against the evils of a system that kept women subjugated, humiliated, and subservient, and 'Sultana's Dream' was symbolic of that protest' (2).⁵

This 'terrible revenge' is taken by a (Muslim) woman upon the patriarchy that oppresses her; this daring 'rebellion' is against sexist tyranny. Additionally, in my reading, a colonised woman's dissenting voice can also be faintly traced. Ladyland is ruled over by a wise Queen, who takes drastic measures to improve the conditions of her fellow-women. Is there any hint of censure of the prevailing poor conditions of women in India despite having been ruled by Queen Victoria for years? Is it an oblique comment on the half-hearted measures taken by the British government to ameliorate their deprivation and improve their situation? Didn't the foreign rulers base their rule in India on the grand claim of bringing light to the 'heart of darkness'? How far is that pretentious claim validated if a considerable section of the indigenous population is still categorically denied its share of that light? Above all, can the invasion of Ladyland by the neighbouring king on the slightest of pretexts be read as a covert critique of conquests of distant lands under the banner of imperialism, including that of India by the British? It is, of course, very difficult to prove. All the same, Sultana's 'fall' from the air-car of her dream back to the reality of her dark bedroom is simultaneously a signifier of women's deprivation, a measure of injustices committed by the native patriarchy and an exposé of the failure of imperial rulers to fully honour their promises. Undeniably, in spite of (or perhaps, because of) the author's triple marginalisation as a colonised Muslim woman, a robust feminism marks her work, proving that, as Maitrayee Chaudhuri reminds us, there were a few women even at the turn of the twentieth century who struggled to voice their opinions amid the larger trend of placing women in social reform discourses merely as a silent symbol of the 'moral health of "tradition" itself' (80), which accounts for the gradual growth of Indian feminism more in novel concepts than in radical actions. 'Sultana's Dream', dreamed at the crucial juncture of social (and literary) history where it stands, is an epic achievement of feminist protest and science-fictional utopianism.

NOTES

- ¹ A 'purdahnashin' is a woman who observes 'purdah', which literally means the 'veil' or the 'curtain'; in other words, her veil symbolises the segregation of sexes.
- ² Zenana is the part of the household that is reserved for the women of the family.
- ³ Several decades before Rokeya establishes the Sakhawat Memorial School in Calcutta in 1911, Faizunnessa Chaudhurani opens a free Madrassah and later an English-medium school for girls in Comilla in 1873 (Amin 115).
- ⁴ Although Rokeya becomes an educator, social reformer and writer later in her life, she was an *abarodhbasini* during her childhood and adolescence. She was put behind purdah at the tender age of five and only with the help of her progressive husband could she fight her way out of the zenana to materialise her radical dreams of women's equality and education.

- ⁵ Perhaps it is worth making the point here, that Rokeya's utopia only succeeds in inverting the gender oppression. In other words, Rokeya's dream does *not* imagine a way out of binary gender roles; she does not imagine gender equality and a consequent end to the oppression.

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